

War, death, and burial in classical Sparta

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One of the most common images of Sparta in the fifth and fourth centuries is as a militaristic society, which put military efficiency above all else including the preservation of their loved ones. But does the discipline for which Spartan soldiers are famous necessarily mean that the city was like a giant camp and those who lived there cold-hearted machines? Polly Low goes back to ancient evidence, historical and archaeological, in the hunt for humanity.

‘Come back with your shield or on it’ – the famous advice of Spartan mothers to their sons as they departed to battle. The words are notorious (and have been since antiquity) because they seem to sum up so neatly everything that we know – or everything that we think we know – about the Spartans’ peculiar fascination with war and their glorification of death in war.

But were the Spartans really so odd in their attitude to the casualties of war? And did they really fetishize the concept, and the bodies, of the ‘glorious dead’ to the extent that this anecdote suggests – so far, that even a mother would urge her son to die heroically rather than keep himself out of trouble? The answer to both questions, I’d suggest, is ‘no’. Sparta was not much different from other ancient (and many modern) cultures in making political and ideological capital out of their war-dead. And although the city certainly took special trouble over the treatment of the bodies of some of its dead soldiers, the commemoration of the ordinary Spartan soldier was actually rather low key.

In piam memoriam

Greek hoplite warfare was an unsafe business. Herodotus makes one of his Persian characters point out the wastefulness of this style of fighting – each man on foot, shoulder to shoulder, with his neighbour’s shield for protection: ‘the victors come off with great harm; the defeated ... are utterly destroyed’ (*Histories* 7.8). Modern estimates put the average casualty rate of a Greek hoplite battle at around 5% on the winning side, 14% on the losing. Dead bodies were, then, an almost inevitable outcome of hoplite conflict, and the expectation that these bodies, even those belonging to the enemy, would be treated

properly seems to have been one of the few ‘laws’ of warfare which the Greek states could be relied on to obey.

After a battle, both winners and losers were entitled to collect their own dead and to deal with them according to their traditional customs. Most Greek states would bury and commemorate their dead at or near the site of the battle. Some – most famously Athens – took the remains of the fallen back home, celebrated their actions with a festival, and provided them with an honorific (but collective) burial at public expense in an area which Thucydides calls ‘the most beautiful suburb of the city’ (2.34). All of the city’s war-dead, no matter what their status in life, received exactly the same treatment. In addition, we are told by the orator Aeschines, the Athenians took responsibility for supporting the orphaned children of the war-dead, and also took advantage of their potential propaganda value: every year in the theatre, before the start of the tragedies,

‘the herald would come forward and place before you [that is: the citizens of Athens] the orphans whose fathers had died in battle, young men clad in the panoply of war; and he would utter an honourable proclamation, an incentive to bravery...’ (Aeschines 3.154)

Spartan sadism?

But what about the Spartans? The sentiment of the words with which I opened this piece is not a one-off – the belligerent Spartan mother crops up in several similar stories. There was little consolation in being alive if one had thrown away one’s shield in flight and returned home defeated. Losing one’s life while running

away was almost as shameful. Another anecdote tells of Spartan mothers inspecting the corpses of their sons, making sure that all wounds were in their chests rather than their backs; if the injuries were in the wrong place

‘they were ashamed and lamented, and hastened away as privately as they could, leaving the dead to be buried in a common tomb.’ (Aelian, *Various Histories* 12.21)

From these stories it seems as if the Spartans took things rather further than the Athenians: simply to have died for the city was not enough; it was also necessary to have died in an appropriately heroic way – facing the enemy, fighting to the last.

The problem with all this, though, is that while these tales certainly tell us a lot about ancient perceptions of Sparta, they are not reliable guides as to how the Spartans actually behaved. The collection of *Sayings of Spartan Women*, of which the famous one-liner forms a part (it’s no. 16 in the anthology), was assembled by Plutarch, a non-Spartan Greek writing in the first century A.D. Aelian, a Greek who lived in Rome, worked over a hundred years later still. Both writers have many virtues but getting their facts straight is not the top of their priorities; the chances that any Spartan mother (at least in the Classical period) ever did or said any of these things are pretty small.

If we want a better idea of what the Spartans thought about death in war (rather than of what the rest of the ancient world thought the Spartans thought about it), we need to look at some different sorts of evidence. And that means moving away from the appealing anecdotes of Plutarch and looking instead at the scraps of material preserved in inscriptions, in the archaeological record, and in historical accounts.

Kings and cannon-fodder

The first thing which emerges from this evidence is that our famous Spartan saying is misleading on one key point: ordinary Spartans who died on the battlefield were not carried back home on their

shields, but were buried at or near the site of the battle in which they were killed. It is easy to think of practical reasons for this – not so much the geometric challenge of fitting a six-foot Spartan onto a three-foot shield (though this certainly highlights the implausibility of the Spartan mother's advice), but the greater logistical problem of transporting bodies (or even cremated remains) over long distances through potentially hostile territory.

There is one exception to this general rule: Spartan kings who died on campaign were, where possible, brought back to the city for honorific burial. But the stories which we are told about these repatriations help us understand why the practice was not more widespread. The body of King Agesipolis, who died on campaign in North-Eastern Greece in 380 B.C, had to be embalmed in honey to make it home in one piece. When King Agesilaos died in North Africa two decades later he was preserved in beeswax for his journey back to Sparta. This effort and expense was surely worth it for kings, whose status at Sparta, particularly after death, came close to that of semi-divine heroes. But for the ordinary Spartan spear-fodder, burial on the battlefield was deemed to be sufficient. It was not how one died that was the crucial distinction but one's status in life. Neither Agesipolis nor Agesilaos burnt out in a blaze of glory: the former was struck down by fever while the latter died from old age. Yet both were deemed eligible for special treatment post-mortem.

But the ordinary Spartan casualty of war was not completely neglected, either abroad or at home. The decision to bury most of the dead on the site of the battle surely made life easier for the Spartans, but it also allowed them to use these sites for what we might call 'foreign-policy propaganda'. The most famous example of this comes at the site of the battle of Thermopylae, Sparta's most glorious defeat. The remains of King Leonidas were brought back to Sparta, but the rest of the 'Three Hundred' were buried on the spot, and commemorated with one of the most famous epitaphs of antiquity:

*'Go tell the Spartans, stranger
passing by, that here, obedient to
their laws, we lie.'*
(Herodotus 7.228)

Here the Spartan citizen's absolute commitment to the laws of his state is validated by the bodies of those so faithful to their city that they were willing to die in a hopeless cause on its behalf. The epitaph addresses itself indirectly to the living citizens of Sparta, but its immediate audience is the 'stranger' – the non-Spartan, perhaps even the non-Greek, who will leave this place in no doubt of the power of the Spartan state and the heroism of Spartan citizens. The site of a comprehensive defeat is transformed through this act

of burial and commemoration into a monument to Spartan strength.

Domestic mourning

The commemoration of the war-dead in Sparta itself is much less prominent, though still revealing. We have seen that most Spartan mothers did not have a body to mourn over (or berate for failing to die in an appropriately heroic way), but the ordinary dead were allowed one form of commemoration back in their city. At first sight, these memorials do not look like much of an honour: they are small, unimpressive lumps of poor-quality stone, inscribed with a message which is tight-lipped even by Spartan standards: the name of the dead man, followed by the phrase 'in war' (and, very occasionally, a word to indicate the place in which he was killed and buried).

The privilege of this commemoration derives, however, not so much from its appearance as from its exclusivity. Most Spartans received no form of permanent memorial at all; only those who died in war were allowed an inscribed stone monument. Something which might, therefore, have been easily overlooked in a monument-packed city like Athens would have been more remarkable in Sparta, simply because this was almost the only form of memorial for ordinary citizens that existed in the city.

These memorials, although possibly sanctioned by the Spartan authorities, were probably not set up by them, nor (as far as we can tell) were they located in a single part of the city. We should not imagine that there existed in Sparta something as orderly or uniform as the British war cemeteries of the twentieth century, or even as formal as the public burial grounds of Classical Athens. It seems more likely that the monuments were created by the families of the war-dead, perhaps near their homes or their ancestral burial areas, and it seems quite probable too (if we are prepared to admit the possibility of Spartans having feelings) that they played an important part not just in commemorating but also mourning the deceased. This is commemoration by and for the family of the dead soldier, not something exclusively dictated by the agenda of an all-powerful state.

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori?

A closer look at the treatment of those who died in war leaves the Spartans seeming a bit less strange than – or at least differently strange from – the obsessively belligerent characters of the popular imagination. The Spartans may not have been rabidly militaristic, but they were not unwilling to fight. Nor were they unconcerned to recognise those who died while fighting. In this respect they were not particularly

different from the Athenians, nor from most other Greek states, nor indeed from many modern states. Respectful treatment of the war-dead not only fulfils a sort of 'military covenant' with those who have already fought and died, but also reassures the next generation of soldiers that their own service will be similarly recognised. The Spartans were undoubtedly prepared to exploit the propaganda potential of their war-dead, but it is notable that this exploitation took place, for the most part, outside Sparta: its aim was not so much to brainwash or browbeat future Spartans into blinkered sacrifice as to remind the rest of the world of Spartan heroism. Back in Sparta, though, the ordinary war-dead had an unexpectedly low profile: no bodies were returned to the city, no great memorials erected. A Spartan who did not return with his shield would never return at all.

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